

# Sherrill Blackman

Owner, SDB Music Group

**Name:** Sherrill Blackman

**Company Name & Profile:** SDB Music Group

Established in 1994, SDB Music Publishing and Song Pitching Services has had many cuts with such artists as LeAnn Rimes, George Jones, John Michael Montgomery and others

**Title:** Owner/Publisher/Songplugger

## **Personal Bio:**

- Graduated from Belmont University with a music business degree in 1982.
- 1982-Interned with MCA Music Publishing
- 1984-Membership director for NSAI (Nashville Songwriters Association international)
- General manager at Buckhorn Music (Kris Kristofferson's catalog)
- 2003 Recipient of Tennessee Songwriters Association's Hallman Award for lifetime contributions to the music industry.
- *Music Row* magazine award recipient three years in a row for "Songplugger of the Year"

-----

**Penny:** *I know you're busy so let me just fire a couple of quick questions out of the gate.*

**Sherrill:** [*laughs*] Fire away!

**Penny:** *What is your definition of a songplugger?*

**Sherrill:** Well, simply put: A songplugger is someone who takes a song from the songwriter and tries to get it cut by an artist or placed in a movie or television show.

**What do you consider to be the main difference between indie songpluggers and in-house songpluggers?**

**Sherrill:** Ah, the old in-house versus out-house question. [*laughs*] Well, when you're an in-house plugger at a company, you are usually on salary, which means you have a steady paycheck. Indie pluggers don't have that financial cushion and usually work on a retainer, which isn't always reliable. Also, the in-house plugger is usually given an office and expense account, and has the built-in credibility that comes with working for an established publishing entity. Independent pluggers provide their own office, usually work on retainer, pay their own expenses and have to build their credibility one song at a time.

**So, approximately how many songpluggers do you think there are in Nashville?**

**Sherrill:** My best guess would be somewhere around 200 — and that’s probably being conservative.

***What do you love most about pitching songs?***

**Sherrill:** Finding a great song — a hit. There's nothing better than uncovering a hidden gem that you just can't wait to play for somebody.

***How do you define a hit?***

**Sherrill:** I asked a hit writer one time, *did you know what a hit was before you had one?* And he told me that he thought he did, but until he had a hit that he could use as a measuring stick, he really didn't know. And I found the same thing rings true for me: When I started getting cuts and could use them as measuring sticks, it gave me a better idea of where the bar was — the level of writing it takes to get a cut. I think a lot of pluggers and writers are kind of in the dark until they have that measuring stick, until they get that first cut, and finally know exactly what level of song it takes to get recorded.

***Who have you had the most success pitching to, A&R, producer or ...?***

**Sherrill:** Most of my successes have come through management. They don't usually filter the songs — they're too busy. So they usually just give the CD directly to the artist.

***How many songs do you play in a pitch meeting?***

**Sherrill:** In a typical pitch session? Four to six songs — max. And I focus mostly on up-tempo, because I know those are the hardest for them to find.

***What factors determine whether you take on a new catalog or client?***

**Sherrill:** I keep my roster small, so that it's very manageable and everybody gets their songs worked. I try not to duplicate catalogs, so I don't usually add a catalog until one of the others drops out. If I have someone who writes traditional country, I try not to add another catalog that has that same kind of music — I'm more interested in what I don't already have.

***Do you work as a songplugger for unsigned writers?***

**Sherrill:** As a plugger, I represent only pro writers who have had success. As a publisher, however, if I hear a song I love, I will sign it to my publishing company with a three-year reversion. I don't take ballads. [*chuckles*] Only mid or up-tempo, and the song has to have a great lyric

***How are you compensated for your work?***

**Sherrill:** As a publisher, I get paid on my publishing percentage. As a songplugger, it depends on the deal that I have with the writer. It's usually a retainer, plus back end bonuses. I try to keep it as standard as possible.

***How many clients do you represent?***

**Sherrill:** Usually five, no more than six.

***What do you consider to be your biggest reward as a songplugger?***

**Sherrill:** Getting cuts for my clients.

*What do you consider your biggest challenges as a songplugger?*

**Sherrill:** Getting cuts for my clients.

*[Both laugh]*

**Sherrill:** We all face the same obstacles. It's a matter of finding a great song and pitching it to the right artist, at the right time. And if there are political barriers in place, overcoming that. Sometimes it's about having to overcome the prejudice that we face as independent pluggers. There is a certain built-in bias against us, so we have to overcome that.

*What are the benefits of being in a songplugging group?*

**Sherrill:** First off, it's a lot of fun! I'm in two different groups and in each one we have really become somewhat of a family. We laugh and crack jokes and rag on each other. Seriously though, I think a lot of the artists or producers or managers or A&R people we meet with truly appreciate being able to go to one place to hear songs. It's extremely time-consuming for them to have to go from office to office, not to mention the amount of gas they would burn. Another thing that is beneficial is the connections that are brought to the table by the various group members. There may be one person who is tight with a certain producer or artist that the rest of us aren't. Somebody else may bring in a manager that the rest of us don't know. So, that sharing helps all of us.

*Do you go to writers nights and pursue unsigned writers?*

**Sherrill:** I don't really go out to writers nights much anymore. If by chance I do, I don't look for writers as a plugger. If I hear some songs I think I can pitch, I'll approach that writer as a publisher. But I find that many of the unsigned writers are writing their "interpretation" of what they think country music is, and often, they are still stuck in the '70s or '80s. One of my biggest challenges is trying to get writers to understand that they have to dig deeper with their lyrics. Superficial songs are just not going to get cut, that's not what artists are looking for these days. I think many writers think they can write whatever they want to, and it's going to be viable, but that's just not the case.

*What mistakes have you seen some songpluggers make when pitching?*

**Sherrill:** Overselling a song, and trying to hype somebody into recording it. I'm a true believer that if the song isn't competitive, there's nothing you can do to change that.

*Yeah.*

**Sherrill:** Another big mistake is putting too many songs on a CD. I've had people give me a CD with fifteen to twenty songs on it, and I just don't have time to listen to that many songs. I've learned through the years to not put that many songs on a CD — unless someone specifically asks for that many songs.

*That's been mentioned as a pet peeve by several other industry people.*

**Sherrill:** That's something we all have to learn. Early on, I tried to pitch every song in every catalog, so everyone would feel like their songs were getting pitched. I

would load the CD with a ton of songs, and I'm sure that wasn't well received. But now, I try to intelligently cast my pitches and only play the songs that I think are appropriate.

***How important are songpluggers to the industry?***

**Sherrill:** I think songpluggers provide a viable service. One of the ways we do that is by pitching older songs from back catalogs. We each bring a different perspective. No plugger is going to love every song a writer has written, so if a writer is being serviced by an in-house plugger, there are going to be some songs that won't get pitched. So hopefully that's something we, as indie pluggers, can bring to the table. One of the things I think I bring to the table is that I know where a lot of great songs are tucked away. If someone can give me an idea of what they are looking for, there's a good chance I can dig it up from an older catalog. Most in-house songpluggers only focus on the brand-new songs, they don't always have a good knowledge of their back catalog.

***What are the most important characteristics of a great songplugger?***

**Sherrill:** I think being a people person is probably at the top of the list, and having a good ear for songs. Also, developing a thick skin, being tenacious, persistent, and learning that just because you hear a "no" today doesn't mean that you will hear a "no" tomorrow. You have to get used to hearing a lot of no's, and a lot of rejection. I don't think people realize how much frustration and rejection that we face on a daily basis. And once they get a dose of that constant rejection and frustration, most of them drop out and move on to something else.

***[Both laugh]***

***If a song is on hold, do you still play it at other pitch meetings?***

**Sherrill:** It depends on the level of the hold. If an artist or producer calls me personally and requests a hold, then I will honor that request pretty strongly. If I want to play a song that's on hold, I'll ask the new person how they feel about hearing things that are on hold, and go from there. It's getting so hard to get cuts these days, some writers and publishers I know have adopted a "first cut, first get" policy. Maybe they feel they can afford to test their relationships like that. I guess I'm from the old school. I try to honor a hold as much as I can.

***What do you think is a reasonable amount of time for someone to hold a song?***

**Sherrill:** Ha! Now that's a million-dollar question! I think it all comes down to communication. Some people are better about it than others. Unfortunately, it gets out of hand sometimes. There are situations that are out of our control, of course. Like if an artist is out on the road and hasn't taken the time to listen. But when it's gone past the point of reason, I don't see how anybody can get mad when a song gets pitched out from under them.

***Are you doing more MP3 pitches?***

**Sherrill:** Surprisingly, I am. Now that most people have broadband internet it makes pitching via email quicker and easier.

***How do you research a new artist signed to a label?***

**Sherrill:** I check to see if they have a MySpace. I look online for music clips, a bio and if they have another website. I also ask other songpluggers what they know. It's always about being a detective and finding out as much information as we can. I'll even see if the manager or producer or A&R person will play me some stuff to get a reference point.

***Who was your mentor when you started out as a songplugger?***

**Sherrill:** I was extremely fortunate to be able to work with the legendary Marijohn Wilkin. When I left NSAI, she hired me to run her publishing company and gave me a chance to learn from her for four years. From a distance, I've always watched and tried to learn from Woody Bomar and Pat Higdon. Throughout the '80s and early '90s, there were a bunch of pluggers I watched and tried to learn from. Hey, even though I've been doing this for several years, there are still others I watch and try to learn from. There is always something new to learn.

**Do you give feedback on the songs that are written by the writers you represent as a songplugger?**

**Sherrill:** Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. I've got writers who have written some of the biggest hits in history, so I have to be extremely careful about what I say. On one hand, I look at it as "who am I to tell these guys how to write a song". On the other hand, I remind myself that for the most part, I know what does and doesn't work. So, when I do give feedback, it's very carefully! *[laughing]*

***Do you have a great story about perseverance?***

**Sherrill:** Yeah, I had this one song that I really believed in. I pitched it all over Nashville. I pitched it, and everyone liked it. It went on hold a few times, and then got dropped. I kept thinking that somebody has got to cut this song. I wanted to play it for Al Cooley, who at the time was A&R for Atlantic Records. I was told that if you wanted to play a song for Al, you just had to go over and sit in the lobby and wait for him, but I was also told, "Don't call Al because he won't return your phone call. What you have to do is go over to his lobby, sit there and wait for him to come out. He'll see you there and then ask you in to his office to play the song." So I went over and sat in the lobby, waiting for Al to come out. That was on a Monday or Tuesday afternoon. I sat there and waited an hour, two hours, three hours — it probably turned out to be about three and a half hours. Then Al finally comes out of his office and says, "So what do you have for me?" I told him, *Al, I've got one up-tempo song — I really believe in it.* He looked at his watch and goes, "Well, I don't have time today — come back tomorrow." So the next day, back I go again, and I sit in the lobby for one hour, two hours, three hours, and it got to be around a quarter to five. Al comes out and sees me sitting there and says, "Oh yeah, you were supposed to come back today and play me a song, right?" And I said, *yeah.* He looks at his watch and says, "Well, I've got a bowling match. I don't have time today — come back again tomorrow."

***[Penny laughs]***

**Sherrill:** So I come back the next day, and I'm sitting there for an hour, two hours, probably about two and a half hours, when he finally comes out and he looks at me and says, "You've got one song, right?" And I said, *Yeah, just one song.* He says, "All right, come and play me this song — it had better be good!" I went back to his

office, played him the song, and he loved it. He listened to it over and over again. He put it on hold, and told me that he was sending it to John Michael Montgomery. He said, "Don't be surprised if John Michael calls you." Al said that he was sure John would really love the song. He sent it to John Michael, and sure enough, about three days later, John Michael called me and said, "I love it!" and he ended up cutting it. That song was called "Lucky Arms" and it got cut on the 39th pitch.

***Wow, that's actually a really great story about persistence!***

**Sherrill:** It was just the right song at the right time. It took three days of sitting in the lobby just waiting it out. But I realized that Al was testing me – he wanted to see how much I believed in that song. Al used to be a plugger from the old days. He said that he was tested, and that he was testing people to see if they had what it took. I told other pluggers what they had to do if they wanted to get in to see Cooley during that time, but not many of them did it. Anyway, that was the 39th pitch on that song.

***That's a great example of not giving up on a song that you believe in. What keeps you believing in a song?***

**Sherrill:** There is just something about it that really turns me on, and I'm really passionate about it. I'm going to play that song until everybody has heard it and passed on it. I've got another story about not giving up on a song you believe in. There's a new artist on Equity Records named Laura Bryna, and one of the songs that she cut on her album is one I had pitched for several years, over and over again. When Laura cut it, I went back to see how many times I pitched it, and I counted 132 times!

***Do you have a story about a song that didn't get cut, one that was so close that it hurt — but you can still talk about it?***

**Sherrill:** The most frustrated I've ever been with any song was "Three Wooden Crosses." I was over in Doug Johnson's studio one day when he played me the demo. I instantly knew I had heard a monster, a classic that needed to be recorded. I asked Doug if I could take it to Tim McGraw. He said I could, so I instantly got on the phone to set up a meeting with Missi Gallimore. Missi loved it for Tim, but Tim passed. So, I started pitching it to anybody else I could get to listen. It was passed on for Brad Paisley, Darryl Worley, Kenny Rogers and several others. When I called Doug to tell him how frustrated I was because no one was jumping on his song, he told me to quit pitching it. He said Randy Travis was going to record it. Randy did and it went to number one and won virtually every award it was nominated for, including "Song Of The Year" for the CMA, the ACM, NSAI and the GMA. I think it even won a Grammy.

***Wow! What would you say to someone who tells you that they want to be a songplugger, and would like to know how to get started?***

**Sherrill:** [laughs] I actually get that question all the time, and I always try to encourage people to follow their dreams. Although I am encouraging, I also try to talk about the reality of what it involves. It's all about people, so you have to have the contacts to start with. And just because you know the people, it doesn't mean you have access to them. It takes a while to develop those relationships. You need to learn that there is a fine line between being a professional and being a pest. If

somebody really feels called to be a songplugger, then find some great songs, get on the phone and start calling people — just get in there and do it!

*I think that some people think that it's a little more glamorous than it really is.*

**Sherrill:** And more lucrative.

*[Both laugh]*

*Since having contacts is so important, where do you suggest new songpluggers go to meet industry people or make those contacts?*

**Sherrill:** I think a person is only limited by their creativity and willingness to work. One way to develop contacts is to get involved in the music community. To start with, there is NARAS and SOLID. If you're not in a plugging group, join one or start one. Go to as many number one parties as you can, at BMI, ASCAP and SESAC. Find out about showcases and go to them. Buy and study *Music Row* magazine's "In Charge" edition. All this is just a quick off the top of my head.

*One of my reasons for writing this book is to educate songwriters here, and out-of-town on how to know if they're ready to hire a songplugger. What advice do you have for those songwriters?*

**Sherrill:** Based on my experience and background in this business — and I've been in this business since 1983 — I honestly, really haven't met any out-of-town writers who were ready for a plugger. Many of them often think they are, but they're not. Out-of-town songwriters have to be careful of not getting ripped off, because there are a handful of people out there calling themselves songpluggers, and they are just taking money.

*What would you say to an out-of-town writer who says, "Regardless of what you say, I'm looking for a songplugger — what advice can you give me?"*

**Sherrill:** First thing is: There are only a handful of writers who have done this from the outside. A writer really needs to come to Nashville and do their homework. Find somebody who's passionate about your songs, and who's willing to get out there and try to get them recorded. Just make sure you're not wasting your money. Ask people around the music community if they have heard of this plugger. Ask if they have a good reputation and are respected on Music Row. Ask the plugger, "What writers do you represent? Who have you had cuts with? Who can you get in to see?" A lot of people are writing what they think is country music, but unless you spend time here, you don't know what's going on — you don't know where the bar is. Talk to ASCAP, BMI or SESAC, or go to NSAI and talk to them — ask them if they think your songs are competitive. Most of the time, writers don't want to hear the truth about their songs — not really. But they're going to find out sooner or later anyway. Please print that.

*Do you think songwriters are doing their due diligence when hiring a plugger?*

**Sherrill:** No, because most of them just want to hear that their songs are good, that they're hits. So if someone is willing to tell them that, when everyone else is saying that the songs aren't ready, guess who they believe? There is a phenomenon I've experienced through the years — how people can be really, really smart and intelligent in whatever walk of life they're in, but when it comes to the music

business they get dumb real quick. I know that sounds harsh, but it's just amazing! They don't comprehend that it's a business and not a fantasy world. The bottom line is it's a business, and you have to approach it as a business.

***What is your view on taking your writers' suggestions regarding who their songs should be pitched to?***

**Sherrill:** I don't mind getting suggestions from my writers. They may have an idea that I haven't thought of or would never think of. However, most writers are not very good at casting their own material. I've found that some writers feel that every one of their songs fit every artist — every time.

***[Both laugh]***

**Sherrill:** What we have to do is bring a more objective perspective to the situation. I encourage my writers to give me suggestions because I can't think of everything all the time, but I have to review the suggestions intelligently. They base it on what they think that artist is looking for, or what they may have read on a tip sheet. My job is to be a true detective and ask questions of A&R, artists, producers, managers to get more accurate information — I use the tip sheets as general guidelines. Most of the time, writers don't know the information that I know. I have a lot of songs to choose from, and maybe only four, five, or six songs are going to get played at a meeting, so I have to whittle it down to what is the most appropriate pitch for that situation.

***Any final thoughts on songpluggers, or any questions that you would have liked to have been asked?***

**Sherrill:** Not really, I think you covered everything. Well, I will say one more thing: Through the years, I've noticed that some writers tend to think that songpluggers should be miracle workers, that we should somehow guarantee them cuts. They may not express it verbally, but you can tell it in their attitude. I've had to tell writers on occasion that I can't make someone like or want to record their song. The song has to be there, and the timing has to be right. And it's funny: When a song gets recorded and it becomes a hit, the writer gets credited with writing a great song, but if a song doesn't get recorded, we songpluggers get blamed for not pitching it enough.

*[laughs]* Not to be negative, but it's kind of like, overlooked if you do, and damned if you don't.

***[Both laugh]***

**Sherrill:** But, hey, that's the nature of our business. We're not in this for the glory anyway, are we? *[chuckles]*

*[laughs]* **What else is there?**

**Sherrill:** The cash?

***[Big laugh]*** **Well, thank you so much for doing this interview.**

**Sherrill:** I'm happy to do it.